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WALKING BASS: THE NEXT STEP

Last time we discussed the concept of using chord tones to create walking bass lines. The value of the chord tone-only approach lies in the fact that our bass lines completely outline our chord changes. In addition, chord tones are easy to manage from a fretboard perspective using simple arpeggio forms.

If you have been practicing this method for improvising walking bass lines for a while, you have probably already figured out that it has its limitations. since you are never working with more than 4 notes at a time for each chord change, it is easy to run out of interesting ideas. Furthermore, your lines are pretty much limited to what I might refer to as a very angular sound, because of the larger intervallic distances between each chord tone. Suffice it to say that this is a great exercise for introducing yourself to walking bass lines, but it is not really designed to be a strategy for more advanced playing.

The reason I like to have my students begin with chord tones when they are starting to play walking bass or solo is so that they don't lose the identity and sound of the chord changes they are playing to. It is easy to imagine that if you only tried to follow the changes by ear, you may or may not do a good job of connecting each individual change in a melodic way. Regardless of how advanced your walking lines or solos become, you will still maintain a reliance on chord tones as target notes for outlining the shapes of your musical phrases. Listen to any great soloist, and you will hear what I mean.

In order to 'move to the next level' with your walking lines, we will want to use shapes and phrases that will connect each note using smaller and smaller distances. Smaller distances between each note in a walking line directly translates into a perceived level of 'smoothness' in the line. A walking bass line, like a great solo, is really a living and breathing component of music. There are peaks and valleys in dynamics and shape, times of tension and release, and the combination of high and low ranges on the instrument being used.
To achieve more of this musical goal in our practice routine, we will now incorporate scale tones into the mix. In other words, instead of just relying on chord tones, we will now mix chord tones and scale tones, which will give us a larger number of choices for improvising. The use of scale tones will allow us to use smaller distances between note choices, since there are a greater number of scale tones in a single octave than there are arpeggio tones, or chord tones, alone.

Some examples of walking bass lines using scale tones can be seen in **exercises 1-3**.

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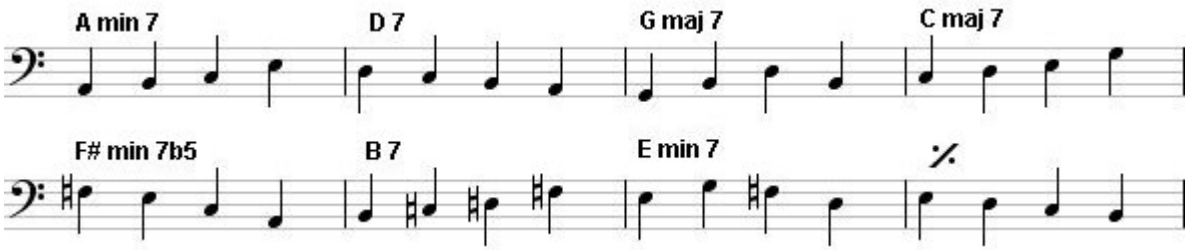
Ex. 1



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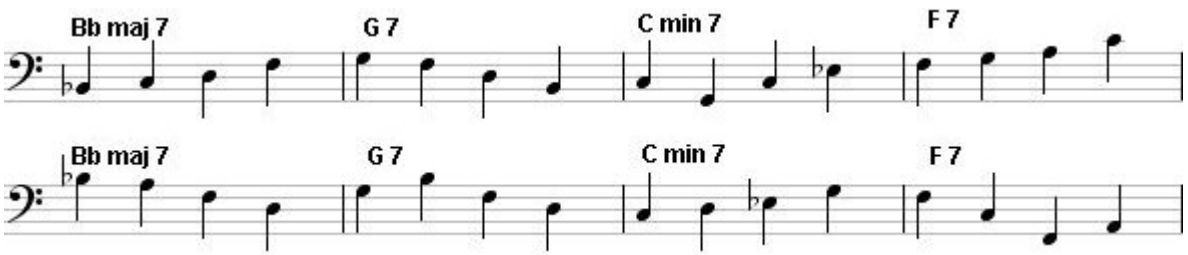

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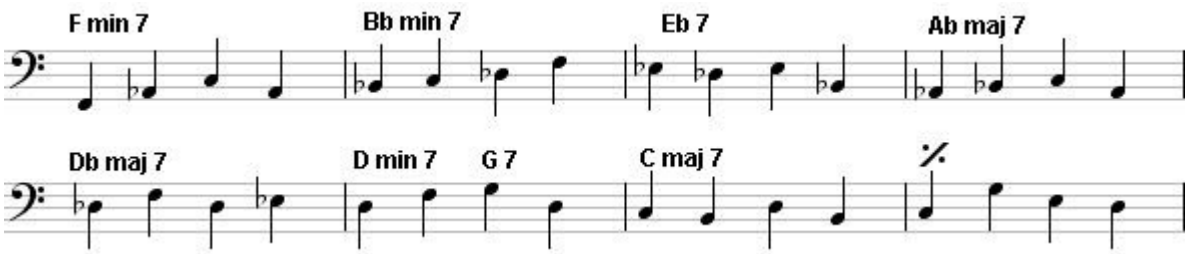

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In order to make use of scale tones, we will first have to assign scales to chord types, so we know what scales to play when we encounter different chord types. For this first series of exercises, we can choose from the modes of the major scale to establish which modes will be used for which chords.

Fig. 1 is a diagram outlining a set of modes we can use for some basic chord types: (IMPORTANT: Each scale/mode would be played starting from the ROOT of the specified chord.)

Fig. 1

MODAL ASSIGNMENTS BASED ON CHORD TYPE

CHORD TYPE	Major 7	Minor 7	7	Minor 7b5
MODE USED	Ionian	Dorian	Mixolydian	Locrian

For example, if you encountered a C minor 7 chord, you would use the notes of C dorian (C, D, Eb, F, G, A, Bb, C) for your walking line. Similarly, if you encountered a G 7 chord, you would use the notes of G mixolydian (G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G) to play through it.
To clarify the use of these modes even further, **Fig. 2** shows a diagram listing the intervallic construction of each of the modes used in **Fig.1**.

Fig. 2

Ionian: root, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, root

Dorian: root, 2, b3, 4, 5, 6, b7, root

Mixolydian: root, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, b7, root

Locrian: root, b2, b3, 4, b5, b6, b7, root

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Figs. 3-6 are some one octave modal shapes you can use for constructing your walking bass lines (In each example, the lowest line corresponds to your lowest pitched string. The first note on that string would correspond to the root of the scale):

Fig. 3

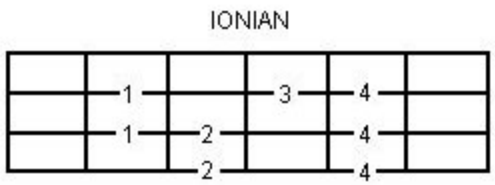

Fig. 4

Fig. 5

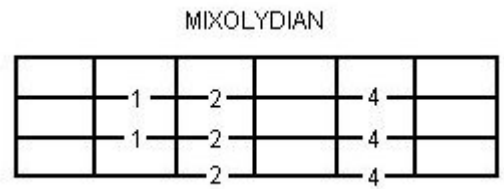

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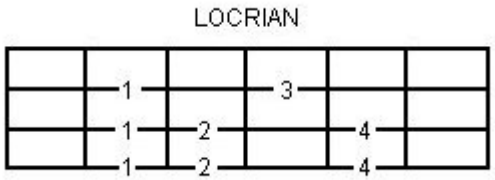
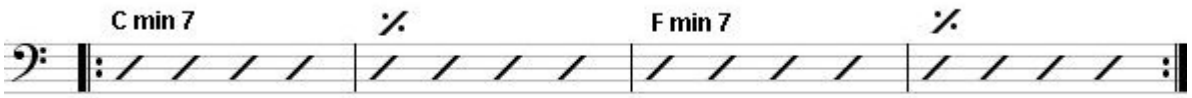
Fig. 6



Now that you understand how to connect select modes to chord types, it is time for you to try some scale tone walking bass lines on your own. **Exercises 4-8** are some sample chord progressions for you to walk to. In each example, make sure to place the root of the chord on beat 1 of the measure. This way you will avoid any ambiguity in the harmony of your bass lines. This is not any type of hard fast rule, however... As you progress, there will be instances in which the integrity of the bass line will depend on you knowing when to use alternative chord tones on beat 1 or on any other downbeat of a chord change. Before you start experimenting with that, however, first try and master this type of approach in which the root announces each chord change to the listener. Have fun!!!

Ex. 4



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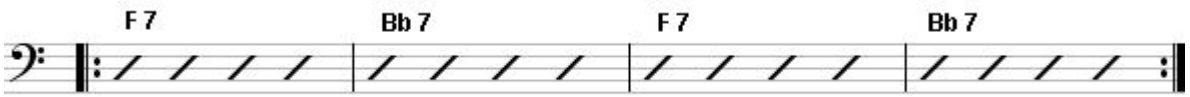

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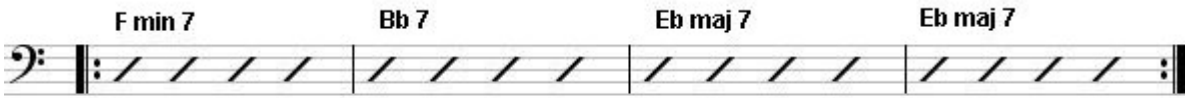
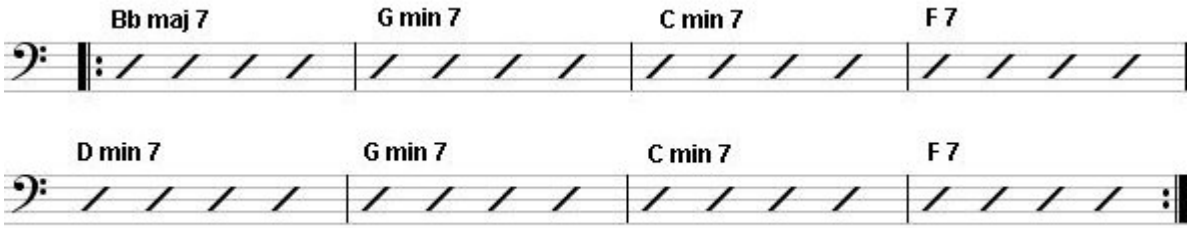
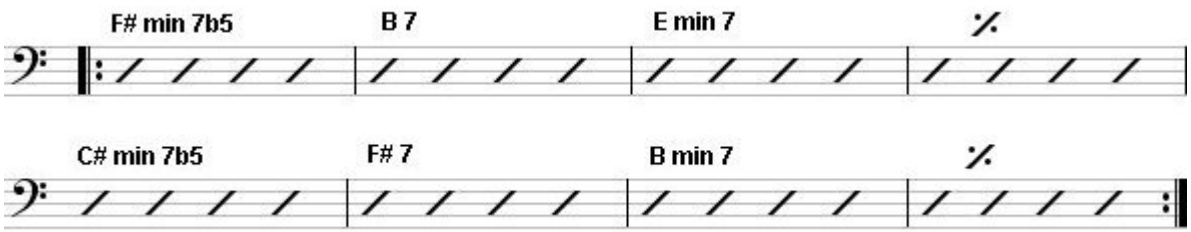

F min 7
Bb 7
Eb maj 7
Eb maj 7

Ex. 7


Bb maj 7
G min 7
C min 7
F 7
D min 7
G min 7
C min 7
F 7

Ex. 8


F# min 7b5
B 7
E min 7
%
C# min 7b5
F# 7
B min 7
%

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